

Perceptions of fieldwork education in Malta: Challenges and opportunities

MARJORIE BONELLO Occupational Therapy Division, Institute of Health Care, University of Malta

ABSTRACT: *Academic upgrading of the occupational therapy programme in Malta has necessitated exploration of current fieldwork practices through a qualitative study. Data were collected through one-to-one interviews with 18 recently qualified occupational therapists. The findings showed the multi-faceted and complex nature of the fieldwork process, confirming the strong influence and relationships between the fieldwork context, the fieldwork supervisor and the different values and attitudes each learner brings to the fieldwork situation. The various practices as voiced by the participants affected the quality of their fieldwork experiences in different ways. Awareness of these key influences will pave the way forward for fieldwork education planners to provide meaningful experiences.*

Key words: occupational therapy, perceptions on fieldwork experiences, qualitative research.

Introduction

Fieldwork is a core component of occupational therapy education through which students are expected to develop competence to practise occupational therapy (Backman, 1994). In 1985, the University of Malta began offering a three-year diploma course in occupational therapy, and in 1999 this diploma was upgraded to a BSc (Hons) degree. This brought occupational therapy in line with other professions and raised entry-level criteria. According to Storm (1990), university education as the point of professional entry is seen as producing practitioners who are capable of doing research as well as being master clinicians, educators, administrators, consultants and health planners.

This article is based on a dissertation entitled 'Fieldwork Education: The Maltese Experience', which was a partial requirement for the award of a MSc in Occupational Therapy from the University of East London (1998).

The purpose of this study was to explore the fieldwork experiences of recently qualified occupational therapists in Malta. It was hoped that the data obtained would provide an 'inside look' at student experiences and identify both barriers and facilitating factors to meaningful fieldwork experiences. This knowledge would have implications for fieldwork education in the new degree programme.¹

The context of the study

Malta is a small island of slightly more than 370 000 inhabitants that forms part of an archipelago consisting of three islands in the middle of the Mediterranean. After a long history of colonization, Malta has been an independent republic since 1964. Presently, Malta is in the process of negotiations for European Union access.

Understandings of fieldwork experiences

There are few qualitative studies in occupational therapy that look at broad perceptions of fieldwork experiences. This is even more marked when one considers the dearth of studies conducted from the students' perspective. In fact, research in this field usually focuses on the perspective of the supervising therapist or faculty.

Tompson and Ryan (1996a, 1996b) explored influences on students during early fieldwork placements in Canada. The results identified the crucial role of the fieldwork educator, the division of placements into physical and psychosocial setting and the impact of the pace of placements on students' fieldwork experiences. Meyers (1989) and Swinehart and Meyers (1993) undertook naturalistic inquiries evaluating occupational therapy fieldwork environments. Meyers (1989) evaluated three fieldwork settings in which students and supervisors described, compared and contrasted ideal environments with actual fieldwork placements. For each of these settings, a different list of factors contributing to the ideal environment emerged. Swinehart and Meyers (1993) explored the purpose of Level I fieldwork (first clinical experience) among occupational therapy students, clinical educators and faculty members. They found that the differences in the objectives of each of the three groups of respondents underlined the importance of enhancing communication between these parties. In a similar vein, Kautzmann (1987), using quantitative measures, compared ranking of Level 1 fieldwork objectives among academic faculty members, fieldwork supervisors and students. She suggested that all these players should look beyond their differences and work towards strengthening the fieldwork experience.

Methodology

The main purpose of this study was to explore the meanings that recent occupational therapy graduates in Malta attributed to their fieldwork experiences.

Naturalistic inquiry was an appropriate method because it allowed the researcher to explore each individual's past experiences as well as providing a framework for a disciplined form of inquiry. Yerxa (1991) stated that the elements of qualitative research include dealing with participants' experience of meaning and looking at the entire context of a situation in all its complexity. This encapsulated the kernel of my study, capturing the meaning and richness of participants' experiences on their fieldwork placements and looking at these experiences in relation to the broad nature of fieldwork practice both locally and internationally.

Fieldwork experiences were explored from the perspectives of recently qualified occupational therapists. Although there was also the possibility of looking at students still undergoing their fieldwork placements, newly qualified occupational therapists were felt to be able to give a 'richer' and more holistic account of their overall fieldwork experiences. The researcher was prevented from interviewing senior students still undergoing the course because the researcher was their fieldwork coordinator. Students might have produced biased accounts about their placements because of this. It was also felt to be very difficult to eliminate the power element between both parties.

The sample population thus involved occupational therapists who were practising as professionals and who had undergone the obligatory fieldwork component as part of their qualification criteria. The relationship between the researcher and the prospective participants was that of colleague therapists.

The size of the sample needed to be no fewer than 20 participants, two of whom were to make up the pilot study. No specific selection could take place because the number of occupational therapists in the latest cohorts to have qualified with a diploma amounted to 22 individuals. In all, the sample consisted of 20 therapists. The two therapists who were excluded could not be considered as one was not working as an occupational therapist and the other was away from Malta.

Data collection was done through semi-structured interviews which enabled the researcher to probe and follow up interesting points as they arose (French, 1993). A pre-interview guide was sent to all participants so as to facilitate reflection on their past experiences. The questions in this guide were: What were your impressions and experiences of your fieldwork programme? and What effect did fieldwork have in your preparation as a practising professional?

During the interviews, participants were initially encouraged to discuss their experiences following the pre-interview guide. Depending on the information and issues that were brought up voluntarily, other prompting questions were asked.

All interview data were audiotaped and transcribed in full. An additional source of data was a self-reflection diary. As suggested by Krefting (1991), this diary was used to describe and interpret the researcher's own behaviour and experiences in the research context. This diary was a constant 'sounding board' of self-reflection and reflexivity during the whole study and helped to ensure that the researcher did not become over-involved.

Throughout the study every effort was made to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings (Krefting, 1991). Consequently, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) model for establishing trustworthiness was followed and measures such as member checking, triangulation, peer debriefing, reflexive diary and research audit were used.

Member checking: The written transcribed interviews, including preliminary emerging themes, were discussed with all participants.

Triangulation: Participant observation during the interviews included being constantly aware of verbal and non-verbal communication of each participant. During the sessions, some brief notes were taken as a memory aid, but full observations were recorded just after the interviews. These detailed memos and the reflective diary proved to be useful tools during cross-checking with the transcribed data.

Peer debriefing: The research process and findings were discussed with three impartial peers who had experience with qualitative methods.

Dependability: The exact methods of data gathering, analysis and interpretation were described. Dependability was also overseen by two methodological experts.

The early stage of data analysis was done following Turner's (1981) interpretation of Glaser and Strauss' (1967) original work on grounded theory techniques (Bailey, 1997). This involved naming data by clustering chunks of information into sets of statements. These labels were each written on an index card together with the number of the paragraph. A system of cross-referencing was carried out, where each card was numbered and titled with a category that encompassed relevant labels. Clear categories started to emerge. The next step involved retracing the transcripts and extracting each participant's thoughts and impressions, fitting them into these categories. Such analysis was effective in making the data more manageable, identifying what was essential about each category across the participants' transcripts. Comparisons were then made across the different participants and within each participant's individual experiences. This step involved writing a biography that consisted of a combination of all of the meaningful labels for each separate interview. Writing up these biographies was a process of trawling through the data, editing and putting each participant's story together in a way that captured the person's own feelings, views and perspectives (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). These descriptions summarized the meaning of fieldwork for each person and disclosed what was essential to each individual's experience.

Themes of meanings emerged from these biographies. These themes captured salient and meaningful perspectives held by the participants and revealed students' expectations of and experiences during their fieldwork placements.

Results

The outcome of this analytical process was grouped into four interrelated themes, which confirmed the strong influence and relationships between the way fieldwork is organized and assessed, the fieldwork supervisor and the different values and attitudes each learner brings to the fieldwork situation. These themes were conceptualized as administration influences, disempowered through assessments, fieldwork educators' responsibility in enabling learning, and personal autonomy in learning.

Administration influences

At the time of the study, participants were allocated to five major fieldwork sites: an acute general hospital, an acute geriatric hospital, a chronic geriatric institution, an acute/chronic psychiatric hospital and a spinal cord unit. In each hospital there is an occupational therapy department with various areas of intervention. During the academic year, the participants attended hospital placements on a one-, two- or three-day basis, depending on their year of practice. These days were generally not consecutive and each placement in a particular hospital lasted about three months. Alternatively, during the summer months, students were placed in hospitals for one-month periods and had to attend on a daily basis.

Participants spoke about the way the placements were organized. They stated that the way that placements were interspersed between their lectures was conflicting to the 'gestalt' of their experiences. Rather than seeing the wholeness of a treatment programme, they experienced fragmented and disjointed treatment sessions. In view of the holistic quality of occupational therapy, they felt that this practice created a paradox in their learning. This discontinuity, both in patient care and in learning opportunities, was seen to be a direct result of the timing of their placements.

Participants perceived this fragmentation of learning in different ways: for many, this disjointed practice seemed to highlight the difference between the theoretical and practical worlds. For others, fragmentation meant that they experienced a limited repertoire of occupational therapy interventions. Because they were attending fieldwork placements every week on a particular day, they practically ended up seeing similar things every time. Participants felt that this restricted their opportunities of exposure to the broad nature of occupational therapy possibilities:

even the type of time we had for placement, let's say, first year we had every Thursday, and if you are attached to a therapist who every Thursday goes for a ward round, for the three months you are seeing a ward round and you do not know what is happening in the rest of the hospital ...

On the other hand, participants considered their fieldwork experience to be much more meaningful when they were placed in one-month blocks during the summer periods. Their concern during this time was that most departments would be working on skeleton staff because of summer vacations. In such cases the participants felt that they were given only the minimum amount of supervision.

Another issue that affected participants' learning experiences was the number of placements they had to attend. Fieldwork education is about one-third of a student's diploma programme in occupational therapy. In spite of this, half of the participants felt that their exposure to the practical environment was insufficient, leaving them ill prepared for certain tasks. They would have preferred more fieldwork placements (that is, exposure to different settings) as well as more time in one placement (that is, exposure to continuity of care). These limitations caused general concern among students that a lot should be learnt in a limited amount of time. Fieldwork education was seen as being the opportunity to deal with the practical realities of patients. Indeed, participants felt that as newly qualified therapists they did not have all the necessary clinical skills to deal with the realities of practice and most of them felt that having longer exposure to fieldwork would have prepared them better for their role: 'something which I really wish ... if I were still a student ... that I would have more time to go on placements'.

Disempowered through assessment

After each placement Maltese students are given a clinical evaluation by using a pre-set summative rating scale. Overall, these assessments proved to be a disempowering experience for most of the participants.

A large number of participants referred to the subjective nature of the clinical assessment. Participants felt that there was a marked degree of difference between the way different supervisors graded them. Marking fluctuations were believed to be because of varying opinions between the supervising therapists as well as between the different standards of expected competencies in the various hospitals: 'When I used to be a student I did not realize that different therapists have different standards.... I used to think, I did badly in that placement.'

Some participants said that their grades were influenced by the type of relationship between the fieldwork educator and the student: 'Sometimes it depended on how well you used to get on with that particular supervisor ... if you felt comfortable with a certain therapist, then you would have done well.'

The limited experience of the supervisors was another issue that made the participants speak about their assessment negatively. They expressed concern about the fact that novice therapists who were still unsure of their own practice would be expected to assess students.

Participants also felt that meaningful clinical assessments should be combined with effective feedback. However, several of them complained of insufficient or

non-existent feedback. They stated that there were limited opportunities to discuss their evaluations: 'it was only few times that I had the opportunity to discuss the assessment'.

On the other hand, a few participants spoke about the few placements where discussion of these assessments took place and feedback was provided in a timely and effective manner. This was seen as a positive contributing factor towards their learning experience.

Fieldwork educators' responsibility in enabling learning

For most of the participants, their world as students during fieldwork seemed to be strongly coloured by supervisors' behaviour. Although most of them seemed to have clear expectations of supervision, it was evident that the reality of the fieldwork situation was different, and effective supervision meant different behaviours to different people.

Espoused fieldwork educators' behaviours

During fieldwork placements, participants had expected to observe the clinical skills of an experienced supervisor, so that they would then be able to model their own behaviour on that of the therapist. Furthermore, they pointed out clear categories of behaviours that supervisors were expected to portray so as to provide them with meaningful learning experiences (Table 1).

Although these attributes were spoken of as being synonymous with good supervision, different participants experienced varying degrees of these traits in their fieldwork educators.

TABLE 1: Summary of espoused fieldwork educators' behaviours

Fieldwork educators were expected to:

- ✓ be available
- ✓ be good communicators
- ✓ be friendly
- ✓ have adequate clinical experience
- ✓ give adequate attention to students
- ✓ provide opportunities for practical treatment techniques by demonstrating and explaining procedures
- ✓ provide opportunities to show practical techniques linking theory covered in class
- ✓ provide support and guidance
- ✓ encourage student involvement and creativity
- ✓ engage in discussions
- ✓ explain reasons for clinical decisions
- ✓ be with the student intermittently (not to over-supervise)
- ✓ allow students to take responsibility for patient evaluation, treatment and report writing
- ✓ provide constructive criticism and positive feedback.

Behaviours and attitudes that enabled learning

Fieldwork educators were seen to facilitate learning when they provided the participants with the opportunity and the freedom to make treatment choices. They were seen to be a major support when they taught specific skills in a clear manner and assisted students to progress during the various stages of their learning process.

Positive experiences attributed to supervision occurred when supervisors showed interest and trust in the students, providing them with constructive and ongoing feedback: 'they [fieldwork supervisors] had asked me what I had learnt and what I had thought was a positive experience ... and what I liked or what in my opinion could change ... that ... I really appreciated'.

Positive personal interactions were also perceived by participants to be characteristic of effective supervision. Personal characteristics such as humour, respect and enthusiasm were considered desirable in the supervisors. Participants frequently reflected that their learning experiences were enhanced when there was an agreeable rapport with the supervising therapist. In such circumstances, they managed to build healthy relationships based on honest and open communication.

An experienced practitioner also tended to add meaning to the supervisory process by being a role model of a competent clinician; one that could facilitate their learning in the clinical setting.

Behaviours and attitudes that disabled learning

Fieldwork was regarded as a highly practical experience and participants found that those placements that were not focused on 'doing' were boring. This was common in their first and second year, when students primarily observed therapists during patient treatment. On the other hand, when students were instructed to do things prescriptively and to treat patients without supervision (during their final year) they felt resentful towards the supervisors, feeling as if they were just 'an extra pair of hands'.

Participants also felt resentful when staff did not have enough time or expertise to create the necessary learning environment. Most supervisors did not clarify student expectations or their own expectations of the student. Consequently, participants felt that they were unable to identify their learning needs and specific areas for skill development.

Fieldwork educators who were also newly qualified therapists were felt to be too inexperienced and rigid. They tended to create an authoritarian environment and were seen to adopt power and control traits. They were also perceived as being unable to identify students' needs, which consequently led to poor learning situations.

A main concern voiced by many participants was to be with a supervisor who could explain and demonstrate treatment procedures. A key point

emerging from these interviews was that participants wanted to reproduce behaviours and imitate supervisors' skills rather than understanding and making sense of the experience themselves.

Personal autonomy in learning

Personal autonomy as a theme explored the existence of any independent traits shown by participants. Most of the participants adopted a rigid, dependent and rather child-like attitude towards learning, where they limited their learning by the perimeters defined by their 'teacher', in this case their fieldwork educator: 'I used to do what I was told and that's it'.

Contrary to higher education principles, where students are encouraged to form their own views on what is put before them, these participants adopted a passive attitude with generalized perceivable discontent. They felt conditioned to accept anything the supervisors demanded or instructed and, even when they found this unacceptable, they still 'got on with it'.

It was only a few participants who placed high value on those fieldwork placements where they were given the opportunity to assume some responsibility for their learning. According to these participants, the possibility of being responsible for their own learning gave them a lot of satisfaction:

But definitely my best year was my third year where I was free to choose, to assess, to set up my own programme.... I had help but I worked around making choices rather than choices being made for me.... I know I could not have these in the second year ... but I would have felt better had I been given more chance to take part in decisions in my second year.

Discussion

The themes that have emerged from this study have highlighted some of the complexities of the fieldwork process, most of which tended to be inhibiting to participants' learning. For the scope of this article, the most central of these inhibiting factors will be discussed below.

Organizational difficulties

Learning opportunities in local fieldwork experiences were influenced by the timing and duration of placements. Learners found it difficult to involve themselves in clinical experiences that consisted of one or two days per week. This situation inhibited the whole idea of a deep learning experience, which in turn augmented the difficulty of linking theoretical principles with practical applications.

Fieldwork placements in Malta must be restructured so as to focus on continuous learning between theory and practice. Integration between theory and practice is vital, but it is clear that this is a complex issue that has been interpreted differently by various exponents (Eraut, 1994; Walker, 1995; Peloquin

and Abreu, 1996; Steward, 1996). Jenkins (1994) suggested that the academic component must not be conceptualized as a distinct entity, but should include practical knowledge in real-life contexts. This would be a starting point to improve professional links and nurture a reflective aspect in the students (Schon, 1983). However, for the success of such changes, it is critically important that instructors in academic settings, fieldwork educators and students should work closely together so as to provide meaningful connections.

Another issue of concern was the perceived brief duration of the fieldwork experience. That participants felt that they had limited exposure to hands-on practice is misleading because Maltese students have to complete and pass a minimum of 1000 hours of supervised practice. Although this is in compliance with the World Federation of Occupational Therapists, one would question whether simply meeting this quantifiable criterion prepares occupational therapists adequately for practice. In this context, one would also query how this time was spent. It is obvious that no amount of practical learning can expose the student to every situation that might be encountered during a professional career. Ernest (1988) stated that many of the skills expected of an entry-level graduate are generic and may be met in any fieldwork placement. The findings from the present study suggest that local fieldwork placements did not facilitate the learning of such a core knowledge base. Several participants reaffirmed that, though qualified, they were not confident with certain competencies, including specific interventions and assessments (such as paediatric and stroke assessments), specific programme planning, selecting the most appropriate adaptations and report writing. These competencies fall into two distinct areas of practice: core skills and speciality skills.

Results of studies conducted by Ernest and Polatajko (1986) and Missiuna et al. (1992) suggested that acquisition of competence in speciality areas may not be required for a student to graduate with adequate general competence. However, competence is reached only on those core skills that are frequently encountered and that have actually been experienced by the students across a number of placements. In the present study, only a few participants felt that they had acquired competence in a number of core skills. As early as 1983, Presseller stated that the body of knowledge in occupational therapy is increasing, but that the time to impart that knowledge has remained the same. Consequently, students should be well prepared to begin their professional practice in a wider range of situations than they would have met during their course. This is what Gardiner (1994) refers to as 'teaching for transfer' and in practice this would mean that educators would provide the foundations for knowledge and skills in one area of practice so as to facilitate the transfer of this understanding into another area.

Assessments: disabling or enabling learning

Students across health professions are continually assessed during their fieldwork placements to ensure that they achieve a sufficiently high level of skill for

effective deployment after graduation. The literature almost uniformly refers to the difficulties and complexities involved in clinical assessments. According to Matuscak (1983), evaluation of clinical performance is one of the most difficult and time-consuming tasks confronting educators in the allied health professions. The clinical assessment used in Malta at the time of the study draws much attention to potential inconsistencies between assessors. Indeed, this tool was generally perceived to disable learning in fieldwork placements.

The literature documents an obvious shift from unstructured observations to more objective, criterion-referenced methods of assessment. Much has been written about the advantages and disadvantages of each procedure, most especially rating scale assessments – which is the method used in Malta. Bondy (1984) recognized that reliability was compromised with such scales because they were open to different interpretations. Furthermore, Benner (1982) retains her reservations regarding competency-based rating scales, supporting the need to assess learners in the ‘real life practice’. Advocates for rating scales include Matuscak (1983), who believes that, despite having numerous limitations, rating scales are useful for categorizing and quantifying data, and for evaluating interpersonal skills, communication skills, attitudes and interests.

In the international occupational therapy field, various assessments have been developed that aim at objective standardized measurement of clinical performance. However, despite all these attempts to standardize occupational therapy fieldwork assessments, Seale et al. (1996), still believe that it is generally recognized that there is an inherent subjectivity in the assessment of clinical performance. Yerxa (1994a) believes that the most important purpose of assessments is to counsel the students by giving an objective, specific view of their performance such that students are assured of their strengths and feel empowered to improve their weaknesses. She also believes that scoring an evaluation scale is a secondary consideration when compared with the inherent purpose of an evaluation.

In the local context it is clear that much work still needs to be done to develop a valid fieldwork assessment and to develop workshops for the assessors themselves. However, it is vital that this assessment is combined with ongoing feedback practices so that the process will form part of a relationship that reflects mutual trust and respect between fieldwork educator and student.

Differing roles and expectations of fieldwork educators

Communication inhibitors

Fieldwork educators were seen as the ‘experts’ and were expected to ‘teach’ the students. However, there was an obvious lack of communication between the educator and the student. Yerxa (1994b: 187) is convinced that the ‘essential key to effective supervision is the establishment and maintenance of communication’.

Feedback is an essential communication tool and is one of the characteristics of effective fieldwork education (Jarski et al., 1990; Illot, 1995). However, this process was fraught with problems and most participants neither gave nor received feedback. According to Hawkins and Shohet (1996), most people usually give or receive feedback when something is wrong. Hence, if feedback is given only to 'correct' learners, fears are actually reinforced.

In the local context, the negative feelings surrounding 'normal' feedback were generally amplified because of inappropriate communication. Fieldwork educators tended to assert their senior positions while giving feedback that was then perceived to be negative. Consequently, participants tended to remain completely passive when they had the rare opportunity to receive feedback, as most of them felt that any contribution on their part would be seen as a negative attribute. They thus chose not to jeopardize their assessment grades and assumed a complacent position.

Despite the lack of or inappropriate communication from fieldwork educators, it is important to recognize that this was not owned solely by the fieldwork educators. As Yerxa (1994b) advocates, effective communication suggests that both the educator and the student should contribute equally in a two-way open communication process.

Hierarchical influences

The comments from the interviews reflected the frustration participants felt when they were placed in rigidly controlled environments. Although it is locally documented that, typically, teachers in classroom settings assume the role of experts and students are expected to follow their teacher's instruction, no formal Maltese studies have been reported that have assessed the situation in practical environments (Chircop, 1994).

Fretwell (1980) argued that highly structured environments with a strict hierarchical system are unlikely to meet the students' needs. This was further emphasized in this study when newly qualified therapists were given supervisory responsibilities. Participants perceived these experiences as poor and inadequate. The literature states that new supervisors may sometimes display insensitivity to the students because of their preoccupation with their own behaviours (Presseller, 1983; Kautzmann, 1990). According to Kautzmann (1990), flexibility in the supervisory approach increases with experience and seems to be directly related to the supervisor's increased level of confidence. This highlights the necessity of having an appropriate length of experience before being given supervisory duties.

Lack of educational preparation

The lack of formal education that prepares therapists for their roles as fieldwork educators was a constant concern for participants. During the time of this study the fieldwork situation was still at the 'trial and error' stage, as discussed by

Christie et al. (1985a, 1985b). Schon (1983: 14) seemed to encapsulate the local situation when he said that 'Professionals are called upon to perform tasks for which they have not been educated'.

The present study clearly showed that fieldwork educators' supervisory styles were not appropriate to adult learners. Furthermore, these supervisors did not seem to acknowledge the complexities of enabling a student to learn from experience. Best (1990) contends that if a cognitive process ends with, or immediately after, the experience, the knowledge gained may remain tacit and the full potential for learning is not realized. Consequently, apart from mere involvement, learning from experience requires a further period of reflective practice. This is a view shared by many leading professionals in the field of experiential learning. Reflection in the learning environment plays a special role in drawing meaning from experience and encourages self-evaluation of the learners (Kolb, 1984; Schon, 1987; Boud and Walker, 1990; Eraut, 1994; Warner Weil and McGill, 1996). An educator can facilitate the student in this process by using a model devised to promote reflection (Schon, 1987; Boud and Walker, 1991; Fish et al., 1991).

This study showed that supervising therapists tended to focus on specific tasks rather than on encouraging critical thinking and reflection. This situation was also compounded by low staff levels, which reduced the amount of time therapists could dedicate to students.

Although such findings reinforce the importance of organizing preparatory courses and workshops, these measures in no way guarantee that therapists will be effective fieldwork educators. Many authors have outlined ways of how a fieldwork programme could be designed so as to shape a foundation for clinical reasoning. Among others, Cohn and Czycholl (1992: 172) believe that fieldwork educators must make their own reasoning process explicit and 'must strive to articulate strategies employed as well as model traditions of everyday practice that reflect back on what we have done to create therapeutically meaningful experiences with our patients'.

Myth of adult learning

Knowles (1990) believes that the kernel of adulthood in relation to learning is when we arrive at the concept of being responsible for our own lives and of being self-directed. All the participants were adults and should thus have taken an active role in their learning process. However, most of them preferred to be 'taught' rather than to take responsibility for their own learning. They adopted a passive attitude during their fieldwork placements and were always expecting information and action to originate from the 'resourceful' therapist. This system can be likened to Freire's (1996) 'banking' concept of education in which students are turned into 'receptacles' ready to be 'filled' by the teacher. Only a few participants took the initiative and responsibility for their own learning.

Candy (1994) argued that years of passivity in educational settings may deprive many people of the confidence to take charge of their own learning.

He also maintained that preference for dependent learning does not seem to be innate, but is learnt. Participants' past educational backgrounds emphasized reactive learning, where the initiative in their school environments rested solely on the teacher. It could be argued that these educational experiences conditioned the participants to develop passive learning attitudes.

However, the assumption of the close relationship between adulthood and self-direction can be questioned. According to Candy (1994), there is a lot of evidence in the literature to suggest that many adult learners feel far from self-directed. Indeed, many writers have debated Knowles' theory of andragogy, questioning the concept that adults want to exert control over the teaching situation (Entwistle et al., 1979; Tennant, 1986; Darbyshire, 1993; Harden, 1996).

It is obvious from this study that many of the fieldwork environments did not foster the appropriate learning climates. Both educators and students in the clinical setting seemed to be bound by a mechanistic pattern of supervision, with the demonstration and imitation of selected skills as the principal objective of the experience. Students were rarely encouraged to be creative and independent in their thinking and did not seem to have the opportunity for any form of critical analysis.

The main issue here concerns the concept of higher education itself. Barnett (1990) believes that authoritarian teaching relationships and the passive assimilation of knowledge have no part in higher education. However, andragogy should not be assumed to be an ideological absolute. Forthcoming occupational therapy courses should ideally include a mixture of both pedagogical and andragogical principles. Hezekiah (1993) speaks about an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust, shared leadership, cooperative structures, and integration of cognitive and affective learning as being fundamental to education.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore local fieldwork experiences. Many interesting discoveries have emerged. These discoveries have primarily offered insights into students' learning as well as questioning present fieldwork practices. Future challenges to improve local practices do not rely on a single solution.² Local organizers must find ways to address these issues so as to prepare therapists to work in the complex and changing demands of the current health environment. Identifying and understanding the nature of current fieldwork practices was a first step towards meeting this challenge.

Notes

1. In this study, the term fieldwork education will be used: 'to describe that special part of the professional educational programme in which students gain hands-on experience under the supervision of a qualified practitioner' (Alsop and Ryan, 1996: 4). Although this is the preferred term, it will be

used interchangeably with clinical practice/education/supervision especially when the latter terms are specifically used in the literature and by the participants in this study. This also applies to the terms fieldwork educator and fieldwork supervisor.

2. For a detailed account of specific recommendations based on this study, the reader is referred to the final work (Bonello, 1998).

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Address correspondence to Marjorie Bonello, Occupational Therapy Division, Room 5, Institute of Health Care, Gwardamangia, Malta. Email: marjorie.bonello@magnet.mt